

341. (248) *Coturnix coturnix coturnix* (L.). The Quail.  
Local name; *Summiena*.

Though still common, this species is by no means so abundant as it used to be. It occurs on passage during both seasons. Some of those which arrive in autumn generally pass the winter with us. Schembri says that the Quail breeds here in May, and Wright says that it breeds in March. I have seen eggs as early as the first days of the latter month, and have met with others still unhatched in June.

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XXVII.—*Birds in the Ancre Valley during the Winter of 1916–1917.* By Lieutenant J. N. KENNEDY, M.C., R.G.A., F.R.G.S., M.B.O.U.

(Text-figure 4.)

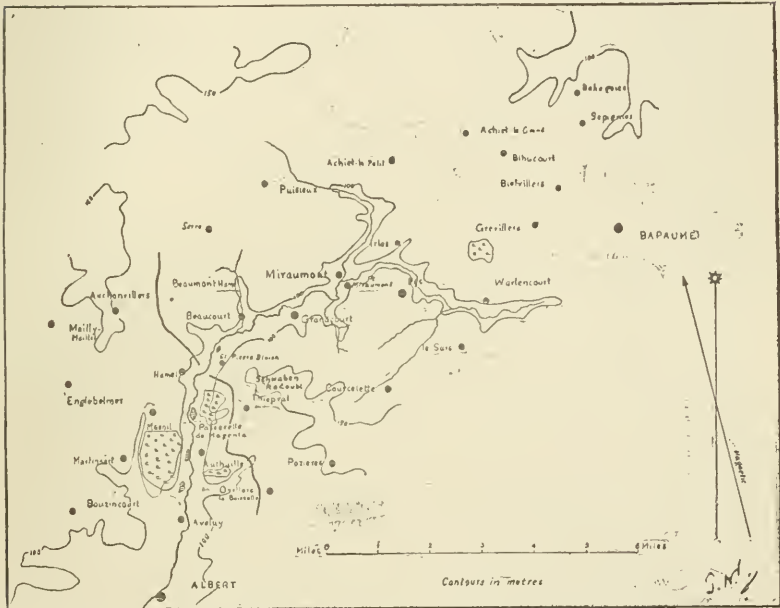
THE river Ancre is a tributary of the Somme, rising in the Bapaume plateau and finding its way down the southern slopes of the watershed through a long irregular valley, the general trend of which is south-west and south. The chalk country which it drains is of a gently undulating and open nature with few high hills, and rises but seldom more than 500 feet above sea-level. Above Miraumont the Ancre is little more than a ditch which is usually dry except after heavy rain. Below this village it enters a deeper valley and, flowing between the Puisieux and Courclette ridges, it increases rapidly in volume. Below Grandcourt there is on either bank a belt of marshy ground which widens considerably between St. Pierre Divion and Aveluy, and there are here stretches of deep open water and extensive reed-beds interspersed with trees.

It was in this marshy tract that birds were most numerous, in spite of the fact that it received many of the shells intended for neighbouring roads. We were able to explore it in a punt constructed by stretching a canvas trench-cover over a rough wooden frame.

As I have already mentioned, the country in general is of

a very open nature, there being few hedges and trees except in the villages. Aveluy Wood, which is about one square mile in extent, was disappointing from an ornithological point of view, although comparatively free from shelling. Thiepvall Wood is no longer worthy of the name, being a mere collection of blasted and broken stumps.

Text-figure 4.



Sketch-map of the valley of the Ancre. The position of the German front line in September 1916 is shown in the heavy dark line.

The notes from which this paper has been written were made before and during our advance up the valley of the Ancre between the beginning of October 1916 and the end of March 1917. The sixty-pounder battery to which I then belonged was in position successively near Martinsart, Hamel, St. Pierre Divion, Grandcourt, Miraumont, Bihucourt, and Behagnies. Between St. Pierre Divion and Miraumont the countryside had been wrecked by our guns

during the heavy fighting, the villages being levelled, the trees shattered, and the ground itself so torn up by shells that there scarcely remained a single blade of grass. Leaving this belt of desolation behind when the enemy began his retreat, we emerged at Irles into clean country once more, and on the Bapaume plateau the avifauna was comparatively normal.

It is not open to doubt that the fighting which took place here had the effect of banishing many species which should ordinarily have been encountered. Many statements have been made on this subject which might lead one to believe that the birds were absolutely unaffected by war conditions. This I admit was the case before July 1916, and is still true of quiet parts of the line. Until the fall of Beaumont-Hamel, bird-life, so far as an observer previously unacquainted with the region can judge, was almost normal in the artillery area and up to within a short distance of the trenches, especially in the marshes near the river, where many shy species, such as the Water-Rail and Little Grebe, were found right up to the front line. After the beginning of our advance, birds were very scarce where the fighting had taken place. Kestrels were most tenacious of their hunting-grounds, and an individual of this species might often be seen over the trenches even during operations. After the Kestrels, the Carrion Crows, Magpies, House-Sparrows, Skylarks, and Partridges were usually the first to return.

The winter was colder and wetter than usual on the whole, and, during January and February, there was a period of over three weeks continuous hard frost which reduced the birds, especially the waterfowl, to great distress. During this spell of hard weather there appeared several species which had not been previously observed, among them the Tufted Duck, Goldeneye, Great Grey Shrike, and Black Redstart.

*Corvus corone.* Carrion Crow.

During the winter the Carrion Crow was frequently met with. Some half dozen of these birds haunted the Ancre marshes below Thiepval when the front line was 2000 yards

distant. In the daytime they sallied forth to the shell-torn muddy slopes south of the river, venturing as far as the support trenches when things were quiet. I have also observed them further back fluttering over partridge snares set by some French gunners. They were much in evidence at Grandcourt shortly after that village was taken. When we had left the shelled zone behind, they were much rarer.

*Corvus cornix.* Hooded Crow.

This species was only twice observed in the firing zone: once on 29 December, when one flew over our battery position near Hamel, and again on 19 January, when two were seen near the Passerelle de Magenta.

*Corvus frugilegus.* Rook.

The Rook was very common, and frequented the fields round Martinsart, Englebelmer, and Aveluy Wood. It was most numerous in early November, when flocks consisting of several hundreds of birds were seen. I have never noticed them in the vicinity of the trenches except on 7 February, when a company was observed, during a spell of hard frost, feeding on biscuits and other fragments of food lying about the old front-line system near Beaumont-Hamel. They were again met with in considerable numbers near Behagnies.

*Fica pica.* Magpie.

The Magpie is remarkably numerous in the Ancre valley, and individuals were always to be found quite close to the front line wherever a few trees were left standing. There were several of these birds in Grandcourt and Petit Mir-aumont on the day after they fell into our hands. Near Behagnies on 28 March I counted fifty perching on one tree.

On 30 October, near Mailly-Maillet, I saw a Magpie fly up to a crater made by a shell a few seconds previously, and begin to feed on the grubs among the freshly scattered earth.

*Garrulus glandarius.* Continental Jay.

By no means common. I saw one on 31 December near the Passerelle de Magenta, and, during February, occasional examples in Aveluy Wood.

*Sturnus vulgaris.* Starling.

Very common, but seldom seen near the trenches except for flocks passing overhead. Many hundreds of these birds frequented the fields round our battery position at Martinsart in November. Exceptionally large numbers were again encountered near Bapaume in March.

*Chloris chloris.* Greenfinch.

Occasional small companies were seen near Englebelmer, well behind the firing line, in November, and again near Behagnies in March.

*Carduelis carduelis.* Continental Goldfinch.

Rather uncommon. On 22 October two were singing in a tree near our observation-post at Auchonvillers. A few were seen near Hamel in December, and, during the cold weather in January, several frequented the marshes below Authuille.

*Passer domesticus.* House-Sparrow.

Very common. This was always one of the first species to return to captured villages. A few lived in Hamel when our front line ran along the outskirts of the village.

*Passer montanus.* Tree-Sparrow.

The Tree-Sparrow was so numerous in November, in the vicinity of Englebelmer, as to outnumber the House-Sparrow. They were but rarely seen during December and January. In March they were plentiful around Behagnies, usually in companies of from ten to twenty.

*Fringilla cœlebs.* Chaffinch.

Common. Flocks of about twenty birds frequented the fields near Englebelmer and Martinsart in November and December. On 21 December a flock of fifty was seen close to the river at St. Pierre Divion, and in January

large numbers of females assembled in the marshes near Authuille.

*Fringilla montifringilla.* Brambling.

During the cold weather, on 20 January, four were seen in the marsh below Authuille.

*Acanthus cannabina.* Linnet.

During October large flocks of fifty birds frequented the fields near Mailly-Maillet, about one thousand yards behind the trenches. This species was not subsequently met with.

*Emberiza citrinella.* Yellow Bunting.

The Yellow Bunting was comparatively common near Englebelmer. It was not noticed near the river except during the hard weather in January, when a few came down to the marshes. It was again plentiful near Behagnies.

*Emberiza cirrus.* Cirl Bunting.

One or two of these Buntings were heard and seen on the outskirts of Mailly-Maillet on 30 October, and again towards the end of March near Behagnies.

*Emberiza schœniclus.* Reed-Bunting.

I have a record of this species on 22 November, when one was heard in a reed-bed near the Passerelle de Magenta.

*Alauda arvensis.* Skylark.

The Skylark was common around Englebelmer and Martinsart during the winter. In January, when it was freezing, small companies frequented the Ancre marshes some two thousand yards from the line. On 26 February one was singing over Beaucourt, and again on 14 March one was heard near Grandcourt. It was difficult to understand why these birds remained in this desolate region where the guns had left hardly a blade of grass. On 25 March the Skylarks were in full song near Bapaume despite the exceptionally severe weather.

*Galerida cristata*. Crested Lark.

During November several small companies were seen near our battery position at Martinsart, and their musical calls were frequently heard in the early mornings.

*Motacilla lugubris*. Pied Wagtail.

A few frequented the marsh below Authuille during the frosty weather in January.

*Motacilla boarula*. Grey Wagtail.

Commoner than the Pied Wagtail, and seen in the marshes throughout the winter.

*Anthus pratensis*. Meadow-Pipit.

This species occurred, but not in great numbers, in the neighbourhood of Martinsart. Small companies came down to the marshes at Hamel during the hard weather in January. On 26 February a few were seen near Beau-court.

*Certhia familiaris* (subsp. ?). Tree-Creeper.

Only once encountered in a deserted garden of Authuille on 4 November.

*Regulus regulus*.

This species was not observed except in December and January, when small companies were seen in Aveluy Wood and among the trees near the river at Hamel.

*Parus major*. Continental Great Titmouse.

This was the commonest of the Tits. It became very numerous in the marshes near Hamel in January. On the 2nd of November two Great Tits were exploring the broken tree-stumps which are now the only indication of the site of Thiépyal. Occasional 77 mm. shells were bursting near the birds, in spite of which they continued their quest unperturbed.

*Parus ater*. Continental Coal Titmouse.

Not common; occasionally seen near Mailley-Maillet, Hamel, and Authuille.

*Parus cæruleus.* Continental Blue Titmouse.

Small numbers were met with from time to time.

*Ægithalus caudatus roseus.* British Long-tailed Tit.

Occasionally seen near the Passerelle de Magenta and in Aveluy Wood.

*Lanius excubitor.* Great Grey Shrike.

A single example appeared on 28 January near Mesnil and remained for a few days during the hard weather. He allowed me to approach him closely on several occasions before swooping off his perch on a telephone-pole.

*Turdus viscivorus.* Missel-Thrush.

Several were seen about the end of March in the fields near Bapaume.

*Turdus musicus* (subsp.?). Song-Thrush.

Uncommon. A few were observed in the Authuille marshes during the hard weather in January.

*Turdus pilaris.* Fieldfare.

Three of these birds were seen near Martinsart on 15 November, and two in the marsh at Hamel on 24 January. They were very shy on both occasions.

*Turdus merula.* Blackbird.

More numerous than the Song-Thrush, but not at all common. It was more frequently met with in March near Behagnies.

*Phœnicurus titys.* Black Redstart.

From 28 to 31 January one example frequented the ruined village of Mesnil, which was otherwise deserted save for a few House-Sparrows.

*Erithacus rubecula* (subsp.?). Redbreast.

Common but not numerous.

*Accentor modularis.* Hedge-Sparrow.

About equal in numbers to the preceding species.

*Troglodytes troglodytes.* Wren.

Commonly seen in the reed-beds between Hamel and Authuille.



*Picus viridis.* Green Woodpecker.

A pollard willow in the marsh below Thiepval had been freshly marked by a Woodpecker on 28 November, but I did not see the bird here until 11 December, when one flew up and alighted on a tree near us, uttering its laughing cry. This particular bird frequented the vicinity all the winter.

*Alcedo ispida.* Kingfisher.

Once seen on 15 December near the Passerelle de Magenta. Its cry was heard near the same place on several other occasions.

*Asio accipitrinus.* Short-eared Owl.

On 5 November an Owl of this species was flushed from a turnip-field near Englebelmer. It flew off towards the shelter of the nearest trees and was immediately mobbed by Magpies and Rooks. On 13 March one was heard calling near Behagnies.

*Carine noctua.* Little Owl.

Common. Occasional examples were seen in the daytime perching on trees in the Thiepval marsh and in the orchards near Martinsart. Towards the end of March, when we were at Behagnies, their somewhat lugubrious but not unmusical whistling notes were frequently heard in the evenings among the trees near the village. It was noticed that they became particularly vocal on moonlight nights.

*Falco peregrinus.* Peregrine Falcon.

On the 23rd of October one was seen flying high over the Schwaben Redoubt.

*Falco tinnunculus.* Kestrel.

Very common up till the end of February, when it began to disappear. By the end of March only a few were left. This Falcon was frequently met with in November and December near the front line, especially on the Thiepval Ridge round Schwaben Redoubt, and, later, at Grandcourt. The birds seen here must have been hunting mice, for no other game remained on the desolate shell-torn stretches of mud.

On 5 November, near Martinsart, I watched a Kestrel endeavouring to capture a meal from a company of Tree-Sparrows, which eluded their pursuer by taking refuge in a barbed-wire entanglement. The Kestrel followed them through its mazes with great agility, but, whenever he seemed on the point of being successful, a Magpie, which was watching the proceedings, would fly up chattering angrily and drive him off. The Magpie was aided and abetted occasionally by a Rook from a flock which was feeding near by. Finally, the Kestrel gave up the chase in disgust.

*Anas boschas.* Mallard.

During November and the early half of December the Mallard was very numerous in the marshes near the Passerelle de Magenta. When exploring the reed-beds in our home-made punt it is no exaggeration to say that we sometimes flushed thousands of duck about this time. Towards the end of December they had become much reduced in numbers, and until the middle of February they remained very scarce. I think this diminution in numbers was partly due to the amount of sniping to which they were subjected, and perhaps also to the weather, although the latter half of December was very mild and wet. On 22 February they suddenly returned, and there were hundreds in the marshes. Above Hamel, in February and March, none were seen with the exception of a few near Beaucourt railway-station.

*Querquedula crecca.* Common Teal.

The first Teal I saw flew out of the rushes near the Passerelle de Magenta, alarmed by a 4.2-inch shell which had just burst near it, killing one man and wounding several others. Some small parties frequented the marshes all winter, but they disappeared during the frost in January.

*Nyroca fuligula.* Tufted Duck.

On the 17th of February, after it had been thawing for some days, a flock of some ten birds appeared in the deep water below Thiepval. They had increased to sixteen on the 22nd of February, after which they were not again seen.

*Glaucion clangula.* Goldeneye.

One male in fine plumage appeared on 17 February in the open water just above the Passerelle de Magenta. A certain illustrious general came very near inflicting a casualty among some of our men, who were working near at hand hidden by the bushes, in an endeavour to secure this bird.

Another drake, or perhaps the same bird (which, by the way, survived its experience of the 17th), was seen in the river near Beaucourt railway-station on 26 February.

*Ardea cinerea.* Heron.

Two were seen in the marsh near Authuille on the 24th of January. Another was seen near the river at Hamel on 28 February, and during March it was twice seen in flight near Grandcourt.

*Gallinago gallinago.* Common Snipe.

Only twice seen, once on 26 February, and again on 14 March, on both occasions in the marsh near Beaucourt.

*Numenius arquata.* Curlew.

On the night of 28 March several Curlews, probably on migration, were heard calling near Behagnies.

*Larus canus.* Common Gull.

On 22 February a single Gull of this species was seen flying up the Ancre near Thiéval.

*Podiceps fluviatilis.* Little Grebe.

Not uncommon in the marshes between Hamel and Aveluy. During the frost in January they became surprisingly tame, and continued feeding and diving, within a few feet of passers-by, in little open patches of running water.

On 9 March we caught a Little Grebe sitting in the water close under the river-bank near Beaucourt. This bird had lost a leg,—evidently some time before,—possibly taken off by a splinter, for this region had been heavily shelled by both sides in the recent fighting. Despite its defect the bird was remarkably agile under water.

*Rallus aquaticus.* Water-Rail.

Common, even in those parts of the marshes which were shelled.

*Gallinula chloropus.* Moorhen. .

This species was present in great numbers between Hamel and Aveluy, and it was almost equally numerous in the river below Beaucourt shortly after we had advanced through this village.

These birds suffered great distress during the spell of hard frost in January and February. On 24 January, when it had been freezing for some ten days and there remained but little open water, they were found huddled together in little companies amongst the long grass near the river. They would fly off clumsily and heavily and, when they alighted on the ice and began to run, they would frequently slip and fall and, where the ice was thin, would struggle along putting their feet through at every step. Lumps of ice of varying sizes hung from their breast-feathers and impeded their movements. By 30 January they had taken to congregating with the Coots round a few shallow patches of running water, into which they crowded to feed on the water-weeds when no one was near. They were persecuted by the soldiers, who considered them a welcome addition to the bill of fare, and great numbers were killed with sticks and caught by dogs. On 15 February, after it had been thawing for some days, they seemed to have quite recovered from their late vicissitudes.

There were very few Moorhens as far up the river as Miraumont.

*Fulica atra.* Coot.

This species was even more numerous than the preceding one in the Ancre marshes. These birds were, as a rule, much tamer and not so much given to skulking in the reeds. Towards the end of December, however, when large numbers had been shot by passing infantrymen, they became very wary, and, as one approached, they would scurry away over the water to take cover.

During the spell of frost they were in great distress and, with the Moorhens, suffered heavy casualties. They were more than once at this time observed on the wing, flying up and down over the marshes in search of open water. Their flight was weak, and they frequently blundered into trees.

They were found very numerous as far up the river as Beaucourt on 26 February, but above this point few were seen.

The Coots were very noisy in the evenings, and, during the moonlight nights in December, their cries were incessant until a late hour.

*Columba palumbus.* Ring-Dove.

Small numbers were seen in the vicinity of Bouzinecourt and in Aveluy Wood, and in January a few came down to the marsh below Authuille. Towards the end of March there were large flocks of several hundreds of birds near Behagnies.

*Perdix perdix.* Common Partridge.

Partridges have become very numerous in this area, and coveys were to be found in every field round our battery positions before the advance began.

These birds paid remarkably little attention to the guns. On 31 October, near Englebelmer, I saw a party of seven or eight feeding in a stubble-field, about 30 yards in front of a 9.2-inch howitzer battery which was firing at the time. Again, on 3 November, there was a covey some 40 yards in front of our battery when we were about to engage a target. When the guns commenced firing directly over their heads they did not take flight, but continued chasing each other and crouching, merely pausing for a moment and crouching down each time a gun was fired.

A few of the birds penetrated to the shelled areas shortly after they fell into our hands, coveys being seen near Thiépval village in October and near Beaucourt and Grandcourt in February.